Presentation of the dossier “Université Invitée”: Comparative Literature at the University of Vienna

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This dossier is a collection of seven articles written by doctoral students and one young post-doc from the University of Vienna. To give you an impression of the surroundings in which the authors work and study, let me first provide you with some facts: With about 90,000 students, the University of Vienna is Austria’s largest university, and it is also the oldest university in the German-speaking countries (founded in 1365). As such, the University of Vienna is frequently at the center of political debates. Over the last couple of years, it has been subject to various reforms regarding admission, tuition fees and the adoption of the Bachelor’s/Master’s degree system.

These developments have left their mark on the Department of Comparative Literature, which is relatively small and provides a rather familial atmosphere of studying. Founded in 1980, the Department was originally located in the “Berggasse”, close to where Sigmund Freud once had his medical practice. Since autumn 2010, it is located in the “Sensengasse” in Vienna’s 9th district, and is part of the Institute of European and Comparative Literature and Language Studies (EVSL). Most of the approximately 800 students of Comparative Literature are now in the Bachelor’s or Master’s degree program, which since 2008 gradually replaced the older Diploma system as a consequence of the Bologna Process.

Similar to the Bachelor and Master degree programs, the Bologna Process lead to a reform of the doctoral program in all fields of study. About half of the approximately 70 doctoral students of Comparative Literature attend the “Doktorat neu”, which requires students not only to write a dissertation, but also to complete several courses, present their topics publicly, and document their progress regularly. Though this is supposed to provide a clearly structured way of achieving a doctoral degree, the doctoral program still requires a lot of initiative, motivation and dedication to one’s topic, especially
because funding in Austria is very limited. As we can see from the biographies of this dossier's authors, there is no standard way of obtaining a doctorate. Several authors received or are in the process of applying for one of the few scholarships, while others are working full- or part-time at the university or at other institutions. Others again attend a “Cotutelle de thèse” combining the doctoral study at the University of Vienna with the study at a foreign university.

4 This variety of life situations correlates with the variety of academic topics and interests, which makes it difficult to find a common thread for introducing the articles collected in this dossier. Rather than in a specific theme, we might find this thread by looking more closely at the various ways in which the authors reflect about the concept of literature and the specific kind of knowledge that literature provides. Anna Mayer and Sabine Schönfellner address literature as a means for thought experiments about possible future scenarios. Anna Mayer’s analysis of Romantic science fiction novels shows in what way the apocalyptic scenarios in Grainville’s *Le dernier homme* (1805) and Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) originate in the idea that the demise of humanity might point to new ways of political and social organization. Sabine Schönfellner’s article on contemporary science fiction scenarios similarly turns to literature as a form allowing us to reflect about possible developments. Her analysis of the film *Gattaca* (1997) and the novel *Corpus Delicti* (2009) shows how these works depict the possible consequences of the current sociological and philosophical discourses on “health”, “illness” and “normalization.”

5 While Anna Mayer’s and Sabine Schönfellner’s articles are both interested in the potential of literature to depict future scenarios, Alice Hattenville and Sanna Stegmaier turn to literature as a means of remembering and overcoming traumatic experiences of the past. Alice Hattenville looks at Ingeborg Bachmann’s theory of names for showing why Bachmann considered names to be triggers of recollection, allowing us to find ways of preserving through language what has been destroyed in reality. Sanna Stegmaier’s article on “9/11 novels” and “Post-9/11 novels” is concerned with the immediate past, and analyzes the various strategies adopted by contemporary American authors for integrating the event within cultural memory.

6 Marie-Eve Fleury, Gianna Zocco and Christina Hoffmann address yet other potentials of literature. Also interested in Bachmann (and in the Spanish mystic Saint Jean de la Croix), Marie-Eve Fleury depicts literature as a way of attaining what is, in reality, unattainable: absolute love. She shows how art allows us to cross certain boundaries and get closer to feelings of universality and eternity that are not necessarily compatible with the restrictions that society enforces upon individuals. Departing from a singular literary motif, the window, Gianna Zocco’s article more generally investigates the metafictional potential of this motif, which contemporary authors use for different aims: while Peter Handke’s extremely subjective ‘window-poetics’ leads to a renunciation of the social world, Siri Hustvedt turns to the same motif for depicting how fiction may provide access to certain aspects of the intersubjective reality. The relation between fact and fiction is also important in Christina Hoffmann’s article on Theodor Herzl’s utopian novel *Altneuland* (1902). Though Herzl is mostly known for his political occupation, Christina Hoffmann argues that his Zionist ideas are broadly influenced by the aesthetic concepts developed in Vienna’s fin de siècle culture. Thus, her article refers back to the science fiction novels analyzed in the first part of this dossier: similar to these, Herzl’s writings can be understood as fictional thought experiments about a possible future which partly became reality.
Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to those who made this dossier possible: Dr. Barbara Agnese from the University of Vienna and Dr. Émilie Lucas-Leclin from the University of Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle. Your support and commitment were of extreme importance for the successful realization of this fruitful collaboration.

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Gianna Zocco is a doctoral student and a lecturer at the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Vienna. From 2005 to 2009, she studied Comparative Literature and Philosophy at the Universities of Bonn and Vienna. Her diploma thesis on the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in Hans Henny Jahnn’s trilogy *Fluß ohne Ufer* has been published by Peter Lang (Sag an, mein Freund, die Ordnung der Unterwelt. Das Gilgamesch-Epos in Hans Henny Jahnns “Fluß ohne Ufer.” Series: Wiener Beiträge zur Komparatistik und Romanistik, Vol. 17. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2010). Since 2010, she is working on her doctoral thesis on the literary motif of the window as an opening into interior spaces in contemporary literature. For her dissertation, she received a DOC-scholarship from the Austrian Academy of Sciences and a Research Grant from the University of Vienna. In July 2013, she will present a part of her results at the international conference *Windows. Their Literary, Cultural, Artistic and Psychological Significance in the German-Speaking Territories from the Middle Ages to the Present* at the Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, University of London.